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MAN AND WOMAN AFTER THE WAR

BY G. H. POWELL

ALL authorities seem to agree in promising us, as a result of our present trials and sufferings, some sort of social renaissance on a new and higher level of actuality. It would be strange if such a revolution did not strongly affect that particular social activity which is supposed to cherish in its domestic nidus the bulk of our national destiny moral and physical.

How then will the changes bred of the world-war when we are all to see each other in a truer light, to advance more eagerly than ever in the paths of liberal progress, affect the old-fashioned institution of marriage, the mutual rights and relations of man and woman?

True, any such effects of the present crisis will operate only as the accentuation or conclusion of a movement (on one side) begun long before, and may for practical purposes be considered part of it. The 'suffragist' agitation may be regarded as 'in suspense' for a while, and destined 'after the war' to proceed to its final evolution.

Social progress, thus accelerated, is to establish us all upon a footing of greater reality and sincerity than has been known before. The intellectual interest and significance of such a change—in which of course the *principal* element has been and still is the expansion of the knowledge, experience and industrial ability of woman—is immense.

The prime question here to be considered is how far this process of independent self-realization, this courageous pursuit of actuality, will render the two 'parties' which divide humanity *more or less*, congenial and sympathetic to one another.

This relation is, of course, no more regulated by mere mathematical laws than any other human feeling.

It is now well known that measured by the barometer of marriage—at least so far as concerns the 'leisured classes'—this sense of congeniality or mutual attraction has exhibited of late years a distinct and serious decline. The causes commonly assigned—a growing reluctance to sacrifice certain 'bachelor' comforts, a keener appreciation of the independent single life—scarcely affect the inference that their success signifies a diminution in the attractiveness of 'marriage,' as an institution, that is both of marriageable man and woman. And since, notoriously, the principal change of recent years has affected woman, not man, it would appear that something in her (modern and revolutionary) attitude has conduced to the result.

Looking at the subject of marriage as it must inevitably be regarded for some time to come, from the standpoint of the man and the wooer, it is curious, at least, that a good deal of our popular fiction of the highly 'actual' and realistic order has felt itself compelled to endorse the view (to which the most authoritative specialist on middle-class life would seem to be frankly committed) that marriage is a 'compromise' and most often an unworthy—not to say unsuccessful—compromise.

This is a part of the high-minded—or shall we call it 'ruthless'?—idealism of these writers. Novels must be written about marriage, seeing it is the main fact and crisis of normal life. Yet the subject of peaceful and innocent domesticity is 'played out' and genius, feeling its way

towards some freer species of union, can find no subject for romantic illumination in the old 'common round.'*

Before seizing upon such a *dictum* as absurd or scandalous let us examine more closely what it means.

That the male individual, when committed to what Dean Farrar once called 'the slightly expanded egoism of a narrow domesticity,' will less fully realize his own potentialities, will surrender some of his personal ambitions—that may be regrettable, even shocking. But the phenomenon, the scandal, is of not unfrequent occurrence in other atmospheres, and the important question remains: What does he secure or produce in exchange for what is lost in the particular case—lost, but not necessarily wasted?

As Mr. Kipling crudely summarizes the matter:

"Down to Gehenna or up to the throne,
He travels the fastest who travels *alone*."

By which epithet is signified 'in untrammelled freedom from any social bond.' But life, whether so lived or in close conjunction with a fellow-being, remains subject to limits of space, time, and intensity. If some potential *desiderata* are to be secured, certain others must be surrendered. In the chronicles of the grandest, most successful, human heroism the cheer for victory is mingled, Mr. Kipling himself would recognize, with the sigh for what has been 'missed.'

* It may be said of course that these literary and dramatic expressions of contemporary pessimism (if it should be so styled), like one famous harum-scarum satirist's suggestion of chronic flight and re-union as an antidote to the staleness of 'the long rubber of connubial life' (and other ebullitions of a topsy-turvydom surely more tiresome than the world-weariness it is supposed to relieve), all labour under one serious drawback. They seem to know little or nothing of the brighter or at least less agonizingly 'suburban' social strata and inter-sex relations depicted, for example, on the spacious and glowing canvas of George Meredith. It may perhaps be replied that these types have passed from among us, which would seem very doubtful. In any case the middle-class body of the nation has its peculiar importance.

Doubtless there is considerable illusion about our regret, as well as our self-congratulation. Life after all is *usually* a compromise between complex interests and attractions, and most often, from any idealist standpoint, not a very satisfactory one. It is better that one important thing (if it be only a question of the best imaginable equipment of cavalry) should be really well done than that specialist genius should be given up to some ordinary task. Mr. Kipling's is, of course, a mere racy and impatient reflection on the general inconvenience of social *impedimenta*, a truth of which there can be no question, though of course it applies equally to the case of either sex.

Man cannot do two things any more than he can occupy two spaces—an office, say, and a boudoir—at once. Nor can woman. So might the question of making a fortune or writing a great scientific work, of learning the violin or touring round the world, of saving some one from drowning and keeping one's clothes dry, be considered and estimated.

But in the case of marriage the exchange is of two things totally different in kind. What man does, thinks, and feels, in this peculiar or intimate association with another creature, is totally different from what he does, thinks, and feels outside among his fellowmen.

The latter is his life-work as a man, upon which, in most cases, his existence depends; the former a pastime, it may almost be said, an enrichment or decoration of life, in the case of the very rich, to the professional classes a vocation which a man may or may not 'take up,' but which no public opinion stamps as a *necessary* adjunct to respectable existence.

Theoretically, of course, much the same may be said to be the case with woman; but in fact nothing more clearly marks the inequality of the sexes than the different

degree in which they are involved in the eternal industry of *Nature*.

In relation to the difficulties above outlined as hampering the conjunction of humanity and civilisation, the popular conception of the matter is fairly portrayed in Robert Louis Stevenson's aphorism that, on the whole, "the best men are bachelors and the best women wives."

In regard to the first class—*those who turn out 'the best men'*—one may object that there is scarcely a fair comparison possible of the free and independent with the attached and domesticated, while the 'best women' (if it be so) are far more seriously involved in their particular sphere of excellence than man in the profession of fatherhood.

The great *complication*, in fact, the web of marriage and domesticity, is a structure of the female element. It is built over the dark gulfs, the mysterious depths where woman 'belongs'; while man, ephemeral man, plays upon the surface, amusing himself with the masculine trivialities of reason, logic, change, and progress—things which do not much concern the unutterable depths where, intellectually sphinx-like, eternal unchangeable 'woman' broods over that great eternity—the race.

If it be true that (in the merely male sense) she 'does not grow'—an axiom drawn from the famous 'Pilgrim's Scrip,'* where so much of sexual philosophy is treasured—her evolution, it may be replied, is a vaster, less fidgety, and self-conscious thing than that of man. She may come to the surface and play with him, amicably contemplate his occupations and diversions. She may even learn to do 'by herself' much of what he does—with a difference. 'The eternal qualities of one sex remain eternally surprising to the other'—the explanation, of course,

being that there are not two (equal, parallel, or opposite) sexes, but one 'sex' only—woman—carved and specialized as Eve for Adam out of the general indifferent mass, 'humanity.'

If such be more or less the general position and attitude of the sexes at present, what are we to expect of the future, now that woman has come forth in her thousands, to invade and occupy extensive positions formerly monopolized by man?

A vast army, more numerous than many of us believed to be discoverable, has come forward, fired by the patriotic enthusiasm of the moment, equipped with the normal feminine allowance of energy, skill, strength, and beauty, to take the place of man. Of this surprising invasion of the industrial world the effect on the national fortunes, however great and even glorious, is not here to be considered. Of its most immediate effect on social life, in the plane we are here discussing, there can surely be only one opinion.

In the first place, unless the most obvious of evidence is to be distrusted, the change has produced an immense increase in the sum of national happiness. Social enjoyment and moral satisfaction are here mixed in a novel fashion. The consciousness of heroic and successful effort counteracts a pressure of grief and anxiety such as would often be expected to overwhelm the more tender sex. But as the effort and the success—with its consequential revision of the qualities and status of woman-kind—has been *public*, and carried out under the eyes of a mobilized male population, the further effect has been an additional and intensified degree of association such as could, under such favourable and exciting circumstances, have but one result, to wit, a vast increase of marriages.

This phenomenon of the moment—for its immediate cause is largely the peculiar distribution and occupation of the popu-

* Meredith, *Richard Feverel's Ordeal*.

lace during and for the purposes of the war—may be considered by itself as probably ephemeral, the direct result of a unique crisis in our history. The industrial changes, which are, as has been said, largely responsible for such a state of things, suggest altogether different matter for reflection, the secondary and future effects—at present artificially regulated—of the competition of male and female industry on a novel and unheard-of scale.

Thus behind the chatter and laughter of thousands of happy lovers thronging our streets, the imaginative listener may catch the murmur of industrial jealousy and discontent, even the vague menaces (first heard some years ago) of that unthinkable monstrosity, a 'war of the sexes.' If such feelings are distinguishable now, what new manifestation of them may not be expected from a force trained into a novel efficiency in scores of departments hitherto closed to their sex, strongly ensconced in many a 'position' hitherto monopolized by man, renewing its youth (and we do not speak of the 'flapper' element only) 'like an eagle' with an experience and self-confidence unknown before? Moreover, this new force will speak (it is now understood) from a platform of political equality with man, or something very like it. The franchise so long and tantalizingly dangled before the eyes of the aspirants will doubtless be granted, and will certainly affect the marriage-relation even if it produce none of the more startling results sometimes attributed to it.

Those who think the change a serious one will scarcely sympathize with the motives which seem to have converted some of its most eminent opponents. If 'woman,' in England, deserves 'the vote,' she *deserved* it just as truly four or even ten years ago, though she is now better qualified to assert the right. To say that her spirited and patriotic action during the

great war has produced a sudden and complete refutation of the logical thesis to which the late Prime Minister, in common with so many educated Englishmen, was supposed to be definitely attached, is to talk shallow sophistry uncomplimentary to either side.

And alarm is perhaps premature. If the real desire for inter-sex political equality flourishes most among the unmarried and comparatively isolated women, perhaps it may not be increased but diminished *pro tanto* by a further close association (industrial, militarist, medical, and educational) with man the competitor or oppressor.

The vast army of capable and well-liking girls (previously 'hid up' at home, as we heard a shopkeeper lately observe) now deployed into our factories, munition-works, etc., and destined, with the best will in the world, to see more of male life and work than was usually possible before—will their spell of industrial life, their journeys to and from their work, their new acquaintances, induce an increase of interest in abstract political rights or in old-world domesticity?

Will this expansion of 'free' industrial individualism (so long familiar to the Lancashire mill-hand) with its political independence do more for the suffragist cause than the increased association with the other sex is doing for the home-ideal with its more or less inevitable subjection to man?

We may leave the question to answer itself, merely noting that the Registrar General assigns a record number of marriages to the year 1915.

The social speculation is, of course, closely connected with the industrial experiment. That the women of England would 'throw themselves into the breach'—in the fashion described—was inevitable enough. That the venture should clearly establish their equality, in certain

respects, or even their superiority to normal 'man,' was quite another matter.

On the authority of experienced 'welfare-workers' one may infer that the great mass of evidence now being accumulated must certainly throw new and comprehensive lights upon the problem of woman's industrial capacity. Of female heroism and energy there need be no doubt; but whether in the matter of singleness of aim, uniformity of application and other points, the verdict would be ultimately in her favour is a question on which competent critics are far from speaking with one voice.

We may realize that the 'output' of a girl-worker has often proved to be three or more times that of a full-grown man, only to find our attention diverted from the industrious woman to the male shirker and his ethical position. The difference here is that between the 'innocent' and unconscious generosity of the volunteer, and the reflective (not to say restrictive) and calculating attitude of the professional. The immediate economic result is an unexpected windfall. But who is to receive and enjoy it, whether woman is to be allowed to reform (or undersell) man, or man to 'pool' the labour of both sexes, on accepted Unionist lines—these are problems yet to be dealt with.

To organized male 'labour' the latter course will doubtless appear inevitable. Man, ex-militant or other, will demand (1) the retirement of woman from certain occupations for which her fitness is questionable, and (2) an equalization of the sexes, in so far as the two are to work together, which will incidentally deprive both woman and her employer of any benefit attaching to her amateurish generosity.

It is the effect upon the worker herself (not upon the industrial market) with which we are chiefly here concerned.

On some of the vocations taken up, some of the 'rougher' kind ('omnibus-

conducting' might surely be included under this head?) her hold is imperfect and unsatisfying. She can do the work, but not as man does it and (still more pointedly) not without a depreciative effect upon herself as woman. Unless the 'actuality' sought is that of a familiarity with the whole of industrial life as known to man, such 'equality,' however theoretically attractive, would mean, in the opinion of many of us, a change in woman neither necessary nor desirable.

The estimate of the success or failure of particular experiments may be wrong or right. But it is obviously desirable that any departure of the normal 'new woman' from whatever be regarded as the satisfactory domestic type should be carefully watched and measured.

This familiar anxiety has perhaps been too often 'smiled away.' Knowledge, experience, larger views of life—these, it is urged, must be essential parts of the modern feminine ideal. But do they complete, may they not even overbalance it? We must take the facts of life as we find them.

The conflict impending is not so much between one sex and another, or not primarily so, as between the fluctuating 'actualities' of highly civilised existence and the eternal uniformity of 'Nature.' In no plane has this been more clearly illustrated than in that of religion, divided as it is (to the eye of modern Protestantism) into two fields—one of reasoned and largely agnostic eclecticism, the other of uncritical (indeed anti-critical) 'orthodox' acquiescence. It is a familiar characteristic of the first attitude that having once begun 'protesting' it can never stop. But seeing that the alternative involves the arrest of all thought, progress and liberty, there can—for those who prize these things—be no hesitation about their choice.

There is however another party to be considered, if not conciliated, and that is

—*human nature*. The pursuit of scientific truth, the full perception of ourselves and our environment, the rejection of all the conventional veils or disguises, these are exalted aims. But at present it looks as if those who pursue them were, by the operation of some forgotten law, themselves doomed to early extinction. It would seem that some of the bosky conventional covers about to be 'cleared by our light-hearted revolutionary positivism included some favourite retreats of the Great Mother herself!

At least, as it is clear that population increases most rapidly in the lowest and least 'desirable' strata of humanity, so also does it appear to be statistically demonstrable that the most old-fashioned and reactionary of the two great religious atmospheres is the most favourable to the no less old-fashioned instincts and activities of Nature. The suggestion that the civilised European world will shortly be 'Roman Catholic' or cease to exist, may rouse various degrees of contempt or alarm.*

We are here merely concerned with an extensive and unquestionable *tendency*. Outside the sphere of religious doctrine and discipline, the Church whose 'infallibility' offers so much repose from useless intellectual labour, secures perhaps for the human heart much that would elsewhere be wasted on the mind. At least, in her restful and comprehensive embrace, she takes to her bosom much of that old-world sentiment and conservative fancy—concerning men and women *inter alia*—which the actualist progressive Protestant reformer would sweep into the dustbin as mouldering remains of an 'Early Victorian' age.

Such reflections, at any rate, may give us pause ere we fling our energies whole-

heartedly into the cause of a general advance of the sexes, *side by side*, through whatever fields of action the twentieth century may unfold to their view.

The final digestion of the mass of evidence accumulated during the war may teach us many things, while perhaps not demolishing the idea that woman's best sphere of action is and must always be—the home. In the scorn of over-homely 'Early Victorian' ideals, she may be pursuing a false—turning her back on the true—'actuality,' just as Puritan English liberalism may be shocked to find the most reactionary of political atmospheres more secure than itself of the greatest of all 'actualities'—*continued existence*. That is, after all, the first thing.

It is no hyperbole to say that the best blood of the Anglo-Saxon race has never yet been in such danger of extinction. That phenomenon is not altogether our fault; but we must cut the habiliments of our progressive ideal according to the cloth of our environment.

That the future status or existence of man or woman should be more intellectually interesting, more politically complete, is something certainly, much if the new political force evolved be capable of remedying its own mistakes and defects, as they are discovered.

But England has lately seen how flowery by-paths of social and philanthropic idealism may dangerously divert her steps from the dusty and prosaic highway of material self-preservation, and leave her secure perhaps of some advanced industrial reform, but doubtful if she will survive its attainment.

So on the smaller plane within, the pursuit of something only a little 'too good' for our actual needs may, like the new patch on the 'old garment,' make a worse rent in the fabric of a securely-rooted yet *over-cultivated* social system.—*The Quest*.

* Cp. an impressive article by Father Bernard Vaughan, 'England's Empty Cradles,' *Nineteenth Century*, 1915.